



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Tarang* by Kumar Shahani

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political crisis of Palm City. The haunting and at times extraordinarily powerful quality of Nunez's film rests in this ability to deploy images which convey a sense of social emergency no less urgent than the forms of personal turmoil it depicts. When an automobile wreck is reported to the newspaper, Jimmy and a colleague rush to the site of the accident, a deserted highway strewn with wreckage upon which ambulances, flashing lights, and sirens converge at a moment of crisis, which is simultaneously banal and ordinary.

"The concept of progress should be based on the idea of catastrophe. That things 'just keep on going' is the catastrophe. It isn't that which lies ahead, but that which is always given," writes Benjamin.<sup>5</sup> Poised between nostalgia and negativity, *A Flash of Green* is a film rich in images of catastrophe which destabilize historical permanence and call attention to the crises and catastrophes of everyday life. The weakness of Nunez's film rests in its inability to posit a collective subject capable of responding to the challenges it depicts, while declining to provide a coherent explanation of Jimmy's behavior. Resignation and anguished contemplation form a powerful counterpoint to the more hopeful and malleable view of historical process presented by the film. How Victor Nunez will resolve these tensions in future films should certainly deserve close attention.

—EDWARD DIMENDBERG

### Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 255. I have made corrections in this translation.

2. Walter Benjamin, "N, [Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XV, Nos. 1-2, Fall-Winter, 1983-84, p. 8.

3. This an excellent translation of the methodological chapter of Benjamin's Arcades Project.

4. See Alfred J. Watkins and David C. Perry, "Regional Change and the Impact of Uneven Development" in *The Rise of the Sunbelt Cities*, eds. Perry and Watkins, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977, p. 47.

5. Here I am indebted to Kaja Silverman's essay "Masochism and Subjectivity," *Framework* (12), p. 3. See also the essay on primary and secondary processes in J. Laplace and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Norton, 1973, pp. 339-341 upon which I have also relied in my understanding of Freud.

6. Benjamin, "N," p. 21.

## TARANG

Director: Kumar Shahani. Script: Rosan and Kumar Shahani. Photography: K. K. Mahajan.

Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (Wages and Profits), which was recently shown in various American cities and on university campuses as a part of the Festival of India's "New Hindi Cinema" package, demonstrates a remarkable departure from the staple diet which an Indian cinema audience of roughly 13 million a day obediently consume. In *Tarang* we are confronted, not only with an unusual narrative structure, but more importantly, with a story told through a discourse that makes the spectator aware all the time of a significant mediation going on between the film-maker and his material.

The storyline is complex. Seeds of dissension are beginning to grow in the industrial empire of an aging industrialist. For him business has only one purpose—that of amassing wealth for the family. His views are challenged by his nephew Dinesh and his son-in-law Rahul. His daughter Hansa sits on the sidelines and watches with growing anxiety the effect the conflict is having on her father. A withdrawn woman, she feels that she has done her duty by providing an heir to the vast family fortunes.

It is into this troubled household that Rahul brings a maidservant, Janaki, to look after his son. Janaki belongs to the shanty-town world where the workers in the industrialist's factory eke out their existence. Her dead husband had once led the workers against the management and she is still considered potentially dangerous because of the respect and affection she commands among the workers.

Gradually the lives of Rahul and Janaki become inextricably wound up with each other. Rahul is clearly attracted to the maid. Hansa, now more and more distant and obsessed with her father, encourages the relationship.

Rahul secures enough control over the business to feel that the ailing industrialist is a liability. He keeps his wife away from her father on the pretext that she is too delicate to stand the strain. Janaki is persuaded to befriend the nurse, and after a night spent in drunken stupor in Janaki's room, the nurse returns to find the old man dead. Hansa, as though in a dream, clings to her grief for her dead father. Finally she kills herself.

There is a rift in the ranks of the workers and Abdul, Janaki's friend and admirer, is on the run. Rahul then successfully breaks the solidarity of different sections of the workers, and having no further need for Janaki, informs her that she is likely to be accused of the industrialist's murder. Janaki is betrayed—but freed from illusion. She packs her belongings and goes back to her old life, taking refuge with Namdeo, an old worker friend who is also on the run. As she waits for him to return home one evening, someone throws a home-made bomb into the shack. It goes up in flames which bathe Janaki in their golden glow.

The film ends on a conjectural mythical note. In a dreamlike sequence on a long, deserted bridge, Rahul approaches Janaki and offers her a life of freedom and equality. Janaki, as the Goddess who is one-in-herself, replies: "Go back to your destiny. I am like the first light of the sun. I am as hard to catch as the wind . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The film's geography presents us with several important tragic sites. One is the space where power resides and is represented by the industrialist's "balcony" in his opulent mansion. This is contiguous with the spaces in which the film's two predominant women characters figure. Hansa inhabits two distinct areas: her bedroom, presented quite literally, and an apparently nearby sea-beach landscape which is presented more as a fantasy. Janaki's "hut" in the shanty town is the other important strategic spot mapped out by the film. What is common to both womens' territories is the tragic "window" before which they are made to perform important actions.

The industrialist's balcony is the visible and dreadful place where power lurks. This is where the patriarch and different members of his family always have their business showdowns. The industrialist sits on his ancestral swing and makes his decisions. Daughter Hansa who worships him always abides by them and obeys. Son-in-law Rahul therefore has to bear not only the old man's wrath but also his wife's punishment of inaccessibility. The balcony keeps schemes that are hatched here secret and invisible from the world which stretches below it. Worshiper of the profit motive, the industrialist has now set his mind on collaboration with a foreign multinational—spurred on by his nephew Dinesh who wants such a merger for his own

personal gain. Rahul, who has opted for native technology and indigenous resources, is repeatedly overruled. This site, therefore, sets up the confrontation between the two men who in their entrepreneurial excess are determined to stop at nothing.

Hansa's bedroom is depicted as a claustrophobic area of darkness into which her own whiteness of skin (she is an upper-caste Aryan Brahmin), her pale mourning sarees, and her inconsolable grief all metonymically dissolve. Shahani shows her as a woman embarking on an anxious journey from overwhelming grief to a strange secrecy that finds its fear expressed in an imaginary zone of "nature" far away from this room. The device which allows this exchange to take place is her bedroom window. In one revealing scene, as a ghostlike Hansa walks away from the window (through which she has been staring outside) towards the camera and exits off frame, Shahani dollies the camera very slowly towards the window itself. As we move closer, we become aware of the exterior space of the seashore, with the tiny figure of an unknown woman in a bright orange saree walking slowly on the rocks near the sea. We connect this unknown woman with Hansa's "other" version of herself; whenever she chooses to wander in nature as this imagined other, she is always shown dressed in extremely vibrant colors of orange and red, and surrounded by an artificially emphasized idyll of blue.

Janaki's hut, the film's other major area, becomes in an important scene the site of her retrospective narration of love. Janaki and Abdul, a close friend of her late husband and now her ardent admirer, are shown seated on a cot. As Shahani tracks in a semicircular arc from Janaki to Abdul then reverses the movement back to her, Janaki describes in a lengthy, moving monologue her brief but intensely rewarding married experience with her dedicated union-worker/husband. The camera movement categorically presents a woman who as subject insists on *living* this scene without being overwhelmed by the painful circumstances surrounding her. This is further strengthened by the window behind her which opens up two distinct spatial areas—glimpsed twice during the camera's slow track across Janaki and Abdul: a mosque and the track where crowded suburban trains pass by. As Janaki narrates the personal ecstasy of her married life and the

prolonged agony of her present destitution and exploitation by those responsible for her husband's murder, the useless world of religion and the murderous roar of industrial progress also get specifically indicted. Furthermore, her extended recital, delivered so passionately and unflinchingly straight to the camera, reveals her firm resolve to tempt her own fate and go beyond the limits imposed on her by the combined forces of religion, "progress," and those in power who make and break laws in that vicious world that lies outside.

In the film, human relations are determined by the twin forces of lust and authority. Rahul is starved by Hansa's glacial asexuality; his lust for Janaki is born abruptly, and he is seized totally in his expression of this lust. For Rahul, Janaki as the new possessed object appears in a double context. On one level she becomes the substitute Eros figure for Hansa. But on another level she becomes a challenge to his executive class because she belongs to the opposed class of the workers. Shahani therefore defines this erotic contact between the two as a predatory love where sexuality is subject to the fundamental situation of power that each partner can wield over the other. But there is buried irony here. Rahul may wield power in his sexual relations with Janaki but he himself has been threatened with emasculation in his struggle to establish authority in his father-in-law's house. According to Hindu familial traditions, when a man marries he is expected to bring his bride into his parents' house (especially in a joint family set-up). But in Rahul's case, it is he who has been brought into his wife's father's house. This immediately places him in the unhappy role of outsider. Every time Rahul tries to assert himself, he is reminded, by both the industrialist and Hansa, of his excluded position vis-à-vis them. And since they have authenticated his rapid ascent into their elite social class, any symptom of disagreement or disobedience on Rahul's part is deemed familial ingratitude.

The disorder in the industrialist's family is portrayed by Shahani through the two signs of silence and immobility. Hansa's repressed sexuality becomes the first important signifier. After her father's death, she exiles herself into a mute version of a woman seeking momentary sustenance in water and flowers before taking her own life. She drowns like Ophelia, in her



TARANG

own bathtub, with flowers strewn all over her. In a sense her death unites her with her dead father, who was himself reduced to complete immobility by a massive heart attack brought on by tensions within the household. This provides Rahul with the opportunity to eclipse this stubborn titular capitalist who has to be destroyed for a *new* entrepreneur like himself to take over. For Rahul, this act of ingratitude is vital because it finally frees him from the tyranny of the surrogate father figure. But those who deal in power, like Rahul, are also subject to a fear that comes from another kind of authority—a primitive authority that is all the more imposing since it springs from the elemental world of nature itself. Shahani epitomizes this authority through the "earth mother" metamorphoses that he makes Janaki assume in her daily presence at the industrialist's home.

When Janaki enters the space of her masters, her primitiveness in dress, movement, and behavior at first overwhelms these same signifiers as paraded by the industrialist's family. She is dark, dusky, and always dressed in earth colors of vibrant greens, mud browns, and blazing reds. Father and daughter are always dressed (and so is Rahul) in freshly starched and ironed white clothes. In the clash of apparel the colonial conflict of oppressor/oppressed is immediately enunciated. Historically, this white preference makes a mockery of the white, rough, home-spun cloth Gandhi had taught the enslaved Indian nation how to spin and wear after ordering the burning of every inch of British cloth. Now, through Janaki, Shahani presents us with an independent India's new breed of imperialist masters camouflaging their illegal profits behind a white facade.

Janaki's first bond as earth mother is struck with the grieving Hansa. One day Hansa calls her and gives Janaki palmfuls of withered flowers she has collected from her father's flower-bedecked corpse and stores secretly in her cupboard. She wants Janaki to daily bring her fresh flowers from the garden so that she can sprinkle them on her father's vacant bed. It may not be apparent to Western viewers, but a mythic status is imposed upon Janaki at this moment. As the patronymic of Sita (the heroine of the *Ramayana* epic) Janaki literally translates as "earth mother." In Indian myth, Sita sprang up ready from the furrow when King Janaka was ploughing the ground.<sup>2</sup> By providing flowers for her bourgeois mistress who has lost her nexus with nature, Janaki as earth mother is instrumental not only in restoring Hansa's links with nature but also in allowing Hansa to create that symbolic landscape in nature where her tortured self can find some relief. Since the name "Sita" also stands, in Indian mythology, for a universal symbol of the feminine genitalia, the sexual bond between Janaki and Rahul is given mythic significance too. Such mythologizing allows Janaki to move freely between the maternal and the feminine iconification of her womanhood.

Janaki's maternal aspect, however, is not circumscribed within the industrialist's space alone. It is also extended towards her shantytown worker brethren. For Abdul, she is the giver of love, warmth, and shelter. Once when she gives him water, Shahani mythically composes the shot of a towering bare-waisted motherly Janaki, offering a kneeling Abdul the water of life from a large earthen jar. Again, when Namdeo writhes in an epileptic nightmare besides her, she rises barewaisted and comforts him in her lap. When she takes part in a "morcha" (a walking demonstration) she always walks like a mother—in the center with a protective cordon of her "sons" (the other striking workers) around her.

This elevated status, however, makes Janaki intuitively aware of her power over others, especially men. Shahani always depicts her as a woman who not only surveys herself constantly but is also aware of how she is surveyed by men. This awareness is made to exist side by side with the different interpretations of woman imposed on her by others.

Her sexual presence, for instance, either as

where (Janaki is forced to walk the streets when she is evicted from her hut by the industrialist's hired thugs) or as Rahul's mistress, displays her as a vital woman whose sexuality exists for all male enjoyment and absorption—although her martyred presence as the struggling widow still fighting for her rights presents her with a hard gemlike aura for men like Abdul and Namdeo. Even when the moment of her death arrives, she literally goes out in a blaze of glory. In the film's last scene, a repentant Rahul approaches Janaki on the deserted bridge and offers to take her back. But Janaki spurns the offer. She is not Janaki, she tells him, but an ethereal other who will not be possessed again by *any* man! In Kumar Shahani's words, this stylized last scene is meant to be "an apotheosis of Janaki as the Universal Mother. Janaki is Urvashi, the Dawn-Goddess who had lived with a mortal man, Pururavas, for a while."<sup>3</sup> The myth is taken from the *Rig Veda*. This hymn, in the form of a dialogue between the Dawn Goddess and the mortal Pururavas, depicts her as rejecting his entreaties to come back to him. By granting her that iconic imperative, Shahani seems to make Janaki transcend the "mother" and the "woman" signification, freeing her ultimately from all male ownership, including his own as the film-maker responsible for her creation. Her last words to Rahul may as well be addressed to a contemporary Indian patriarchy which even today continues to claim its Hansas and Janakis as victims: "Go back to your destiny. I am like the first light of the sun. I am as hard to catch as the wind."

—DARIUS COOPER

#### NOTES

1. This synopsis is taken from the booklet *Indian Cinema 1980-1985* (New Delhi: Directorate of Film Festivals, 1985), pp. 71-73.
2. John Dawson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History & Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 132.
3. Kumar Shahani quoted in Shanta Gokhale's essay on *Tarang* in the booklet *Indian Cinema 1980-1985*, p. 75.